

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 002855

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 1.6X5, 1.6X6
TAGS: PGOV MOPS PINS PHUM NI
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: UPDATE ON BENUE CRISIS

REF: A. ABUJA 2708
B. ABUJA 2750
C. ABUJA NI 2776
D. IIR 7 800 0052 02
E. IIR 7 800 0065 02
F. IIR 7 800 0064 02
G. ABUJA 2827
H. IIR 7 114 0027 02
I. ABUJA 2832
J. IIR 6 871 0511 02

Classified by CDA Andrews; Reasons 1.6X5 and 1.6X6.

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: In Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa states, the military was called to do what the police could not -- contain civil unrest. As with Odi in 1999, the tragedy that occurred in Benue demonstrates the problems associated with asking often poorly-led soldiers to assume law enforcement duties for which they are not trained. There were two massacres in Benue, the initial killing of soldiers by ethnic Tiv militia, and the revenge killing of Tivs by soldiers. The Benue massacres will force Obasanjo to walk a fine line between the rule of law, on one hand, and political exigencies, which include his relationship with the military, on the other. Obasanjo must investigate but take care not to further estrange the military, which happens to be the mainstay of security in several key areas of the country.
End summary.

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WHAT WE KNOW OF BENUE - WHAT WE HEAR
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¶2. (S/NF) Accounts we have heard about what happened in Benue vary somewhat in their details. However, the general picture provided by most accounts is similar. Paras 2 - 7 contain what we have been able to piece together thus far. The 19 dead soldiers were in Benue as part of the military deployment to defuse a long-standing feud between Tivs and Jukuns. While on patrol, the soldiers were ambushed by Tiv militia on or about October 10. (NOTE: One contact informed Poloff that 24 soldiers were captured, but five of the soldiers, ethnic Tivs, were released. We cannot confirm this claim. END NOTE.) According to previous reporting (Ref G), after attempting to turn the soldiers over to the police and local leaders, the militia members brutally murdered the soldiers and dismembered their bodies.

¶3. (S/NF) While most contacts state the soldiers were ambushed, there also is a different version of events being circulated. While the Army contended that soldiers gave up without a fight, Tivs retort that the soldiers were in league with the Jukun militia. In this rendition, a firefight took place where the soldiers and Jukun exhausted their ammunition, enabling Tiv fighters to capture them. At this point, local officials refused to get involved. Worse, the Tiv captors got word that the band of Jukun and soldiers had attacked other Tivs earlier that day. Hearing this, the Tivs executed 19 of their military captives, giving the five Tivs a reprieve. The Tivs also killed a larger but unspecified number of Jukun.

¶4. (U) Attributing comments to the Presidential Villa, the media reported not-so-veiled threats to local Tiv leaders in Benue to turn over the responsible militia members or face the consequences. Media reports of comments from unnamed Defense Headquarters "sources" were even stronger. However, during the October 22 funeral for the 16 soldiers whose bodies had been recovered, President Obasanjo rejected "provocation" and emphasized the responsibility of the Federal Government to protect its citizenry. He said that his administration would not be deterred from this objective. He also tasked the "security agencies" to track down the killers.

15. (S/NF) On 24 October, soldiers apparently from a unit other than those killed (Refs E and H) entered eastern Benue from Taraba state, and carried out attacks against the local population. It is impossible to state a specific number of casualties. However, 58 people were reportedly killed in one village, and roughly 14 villages were destroyed, as well as most of the town of Zaki Biam. The death toll is likely between 100 and 250. In one village, according to press reports, adult males were separated from the others then executed. Retired Chief of Army Staff LTG Malu (who headed the Army at the time of the Odi incident), had his house destroyed and members of his family killed in the reprisals.

16. (C) It remains unclear how many new IDPs there are in Benue as a result of this latest violence. National Assembly members from Benue have claimed as many as 500,000, other reporting (Ref G) places the number near 190,000. The ICRC estimates around 100,000 new IDPs in Benue. The 190,000 and 100,000 figures are not incompatible, since perhaps 90,000 IDPs had already been created as a result of fighting earlier this year. Approximately 70,000 of the "new" IDPs are staying with relatives or friends. The remaining 30,000 are temporarily housed in 14 camps in the state.

17. (C) Instead of trying to calm the situation, several political figures have increased tensions by publicly accusing each other of complicity in the violence. Benue Governor George Akume blamed embattled PDP chairman Barnabas Gemede for fueling violent student protests against the military attacks. Minister of Defense Danjuma has blamed Akume for supporting former Tiv soldiers in an effort to destabilize the area. President Obasanjo even got into the act. He told the press that Akume requested military help in Benue, which suggests that Akume should be prepared to take the bad with the good regarding the soldiers and their transgressions. Many have accused Danjuma, raised as a Jukun, of privately supporting the Jukun militias with arms. Others have linked Malu with arming the Tivs, and Malu has lashed out at almost everyone. Despite these recriminations, there is no real evidence yet of high-level involvement thus far in either the deaths of the 19 soldiers or the military's response.

18. (C) A number of meetings have taken place at State House to discuss the crisis. On November 7, the President conferred with the Governors from Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa to discuss ways to end the ethnic violence and reduce the political attacks. This meeting may have helped reduce the political vituperation, but it is too early to tell whether the governors and President developed a workable game plan to reduce the violence. Obasanjo reportedly will hold a repeat meeting with the governors, joined by ten elders from each state, on November 11.

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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS
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19. (S/NF) After the 19 soldiers were killed, statements emanating from the Presidential Villa pointed to serious consequences if the militia members responsible were not surrendered to authorities. These statements might have been viewed as tacit approval by angry soldiers who did not need much encouragement to avenge the deaths (Ref D and E). While we do not have evidence pointing to senior officers, it seems unlikely, from what we know of the Nigerian military, that these actions were taken without the knowledge of some senior officers (Refs D, E, F). On the other hand, if an element of a battalion did act without senior approval, then this indicates a loss of control in some elements of the Nigerian military, something equally troubling.

10. (S/NF) Thus far, extensive press coverage has not been translated into a sustained public outcry (Ref G). Frankly, the commonly held prejudice that Tiv are an aggressive people who "take over" lands belonging to others has played a role. There is also a degree of understanding for the Army's conduct in many quarters of the Nigerian populace. This is partially due to the gruesome nature of the 19 executions. It is also due to the realization that the military is the last wall between order and unrest. Should the Army be seen as susceptible to attack with impunity, it is feared the security situation would rapidly worsen (Ref I). Consequently, while many do not approve of the Army's actions, they see these actions as the high but necessary premium that must be paid to ensure the Army can effectively play its role as security's guarantor.

11. (S/NF) Obasanjo and his government will now have to strike the right balance between assuring human rights and

these vital security imperatives. Obasanjo realizes he must do something to bring the guilty into the dock. If he does nothing, his image as a statesman will be sullied. Dealing with the killers of the soldiers will be relatively easy. But handling the soldiers who ran amok will be a different matter, particularly if their actions were condoned at a high level of the Army or of the Ministry of Defense.

¶12. (C) These events show that Nigeria is difficult soil in which to cultivate an abiding respect for the rule of law. We are trying to urge this process forward, however. The Embassy press release calling for an impartial investigation into the situation is part of this effort, and we will continue to raise the importance of transparency and rule of law with the GON. That said, these events also reinforce the importance of continued engagement with and training of Nigeria's police and the military. Providing the benefits of sustained and well-targeted training to those who do respect human rights is the best way to advance the process of inculcating in the entire military an appreciation for the rule of law as well as for democratic civilian rule.

Andrews